nytimes.com

BATTLEGROUND IN COLOMBIA: BIRTH CONTROL

Alan Riding

7-9 minutes

- Sept. 5, 1984

Credit...The New York Times Archives

See the article in its original context from
September 5, 1984, Section A, Page 2Buy Reprints

TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home delivery and digital subscribers.

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.

When Colombia's most outspoken Roman Catholic prelate charged recently that "global castration" and "mutilation" were taking place here under the guise of "voluntary sterilizations," the

country's main family planning association seemed relatively unperturbed.

The Catholic hierarchy here is renowned as Latin America's most conservative, and over 90 percent of Colombians describe themselves as Catholics, but the church's cyclical attacks on family planning here have not slowed the growth in the number of women using contraceptive methods.

"We call the church our best public relations agency," said Miguel Trias, executive director of the Family Welfare Association, known here as Profamilia. "Every time we are attacked it draws attention to the program and more people come here."

Nevertheless, Profamilia heatedly denied it was carrying out "forced sterilizations" and sniped back at the "dogmatism" of its critics. U.S. Shift Stuns Group

Within weeks, the 19-year-old association found its operation threatened once again, not by its traditional foes in the church, but from an entirely unexpected quarter. The United States Government, long the principal advocate of birth control in developing countries, appeared to be changing its policy.

At the United Nations Population Conference in Mexico City in August, the Reagan Administration not only stressed that adoption of "freer market-oriented economic policies" would help lower birth rates, but it also said it would no longer finance family planning organizations that supported abortion or "coercive" methods.

The announcement stunned officials in Profamilia, which is regarded as one of Latin America's most successful family planning programs. The organization helped reduce Colombia's population growth rate from 3.2 percent in 1965 to about 1.9

percent today.

"The argument about market forces is extraordinarily naive," said Dr. Fernando Tamayo, 61 years old, the founder and president of Profamilia. "Perhaps in a century or two it might be true, but the world doesn't have time to wait. Take Colombia. We have had slower economic growth than, say, Mexico and Brazil, but we have reduced birth rates faster than either, thanks to our program."

Mexico's population growth rate has declined from 3.1 percent 20 years ago to 2.6 percent today. In Brazil the rate has decreased to 2.3 percent today from 3 percent two decades ago. U.S. Aid Is Threatened

Even though abortion is illegal in Colombia and in every other Latin American country except Cuba, Dr. Tamayo and his colleagues were more disturbed by Washington's decision to use its economic weight to combat legalized abortion beyond its own borders.

In Profamilia's case, it has long received advice and money from the London-based International Planned Parenthood Federation. The I.P.P.F., as it is known, in turn receives about one- quarter of its $48 million annual budget from the United States Agency for International Development.

But because the federation spends about three-tenths of 1 percent of its total budget on an abortion program in Bangladesh, where abortion is legal, it now faces a cutoff of all A.I.D. funding. "The I.P.P.F. is top of the White House hit list," said Dr. Tamayo, who served as president of the internatonal federation for six years in the 1970's.

About one-third of Profamilia's 1984 budget of $7 million comes from the I.P.P.F. and Dr. Tamayo estimated that the association

could lose $600,000 a year if Washington carries out its new policy. "This would inevitably force us to cut back our surgery programs" of sterilizations, he added. Sterilization Is Common

Sterilization - 97 percent involving women - has become Colombia's second most popular method of family planning after the pill, with Profamilia carrying out 355,000 over the past 14 years and 53,000 in 1983 alone. "Thirty percent of women request sterilization against 40 percent preferring the pill," Mr. Trias said. "If we reduced our surgery program, we would stimulate an epidemic of illegal abortions."

Already 200,000 to 250,000 illegal abortions are thought to take place here each year. "Perhaps 15 or 20 percent are carried out under proper conditions, that is, in private clinics that charge $150 a time," Mr. Trias said. "The rest are in the hands of dangerous back-street quacks."

Further, Mr. Trias believes that the antisterilization campaign begun in June by Alfonso Cardinal Lopez Trujillo of Medellin, who is president of the Latin American Bishops' Conference and an influential voice in the Vatican, was somehow linked to the change in United States policy.

"Because Washington says it won't support abortions and forced methods, Lopez Trujillo wants to convince them that forced sterilization is taking place here as a way of torpedoing the entire family planning program," he said. "That's why he talked about 'castration' and 'mutilation' because he knows those words cause alarm."

The Cardinal later said he might have used "castration" figuratively, but he added that "sterilization is a serious mutilation and this has

to do with ethics." In a letter to a newspaper, he also asked whether people who are "simple, poor, uneducated, impressed by a scientific apparatus, smothered in technical vocabulary" were properly informed before being sterilized.

Although the prelate was unable to substantiate his charges of "forced" sterilization by Profamilia, Colombia's Bishops' Conference backed him up by again condemning "unnatural" contraceptive methods and denouncing sterilization as immoral.

Apparently fearing an open confrontation with the church, Jaime Arias Ramirez, then Health Minister, reiterated that couples had a right to receive family planning services "within the parameters of medical ethics and public morality," but he also told Cardinal Lopez Trujillo that the Government had suspended all financing of sterilization programs.

In contrast, the Colombian Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology said that Profamilia had always followed "strict moral and scientific norms."

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the wide acceptance of family planning here is that over two million women - about half of those of fertile age cohabiting with a man - now control when they become pregnant. Family Planning Irreversible'

Further, the new Health Minister, Amaury Garcia Burgos, a stronger advocate of family planning than his predecessor, has noted that Colombia's population of 28 million would be five million larger if birth control programs had not begun in the mid-1960's.

Even though government hospitals and private doctors are assuming a larger role in these programs, Profamilia's 28 clinics still account for 65 percent of total family planning.

"Family planning is irreversible here," Mr. Trias said. "The idea of 'forced' sterilization is ridiculous. At present we can't keep up with the demand."